

I'm Tamara Zeller, and this is My life, Wildlife. I grew up in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I had just finished school and had been looking for opportunities to get, you know, explore and do some work with wildlife, and I volunteered for a job on Middleton Island, which is a little island in the Gulf of Alaska. It was studying seabirds. I think I was overwhelmed when I first came up here, because we didn't travel much when I was growing up. I just knew my backyard. My mind was blown. Like there's these mountains looming, the open spaces, the different habitats that I had no exposure to before, it was just like a whole new world to me. I just instantly fell in love with the beauty of it. So yeah, it was a no brainer, I stretched my wings, and I just was like, I'm, I'm ready to fly and land here and just went back to Michigan, packed my car and, and moved up. I've been here 24 years. So it obviously has taken root in my soul. So I can't imagine living anywhere else. I worked for the migratory bird program. And in that sense, it's great because we're not tied to one piece of land, we're responsible for monitoring the health of bird populations throughout Alaska and the country. So when I'm in the field, we go everywhere from the Arctic, all the way down to you know, south central. I'm literally flying from one part of Alaska to the other, doing aerial surveys, counting birds. So we get to see just a variety habitats, you know, coastal, tundra, interior forest, and I got to see too on boats. So I'm out in the Bering Sea, Chuckchi Sea doing seabird surveys so I'm really lucky I get to see a lot of Alaska, and its diversity and beauty. The Y-K delta (Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta), oh my gosh, that place is just amazing. Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge, Yukon Kuskokwim Delta, I should say. We fly a survey there at the end of May. It is like one of the most great places to view geese and ducks. I mean, the waterfowl density is just incredible. Izembek is I think probably my favorite refuge that that we work at. It's just you have the Bering Sea on one side, the Gulf of Alaska on the other. And then these great complex of lagoons and estuaries and then you have mountains on one side, and just the enormity of the diversity and enormity of the birds and wildlife. It's just breathtaking, the whole journey down from Anchorage, to the Alaska peninsula. It's like you're, you're on a tour, a tour of the greatest, you know, greatest parts of Alaska, at least in my mind, you know, you're surrounded by mountains. I don't know, it's just, it's spectacular. I feel blessed that I get to see it, and work in it.

For aerial survey work, that starts obvious in the office with planning, you know, need to know what, where we're going and what we're doing, I work with some exceptional people. And once we get all the logistics figured out, let's say we're going to the North Slope to check buck lake to survey geese, we would, you know, get the airplane ready, make sure we have all of our gear, we have to have our you know, flight gear, we have to have our computer we do rig recordings through a GPS system that's linked through the airplane. Then you get in and it can be an eight hour flight and a little tiny 206 aircraft stopping halfway for fuel, you never know what's going to happen. We have to, you know, follow visual flight rules, which means we have to be able to see where we're going. So all those factors. And then when we actually start the survey itself. It can be pretty intense, depending on what we're what we're surveying, you can be trying to decide a species and count at the same time, which, if you're counting 1000s of birds, it's it's pretty intense. Also, physically, you're sitting in an airplane for a long time. So you're kind of getting fatigued. And so it's really important that you're working together with folks that you respect and that you have a mutual understanding for. So we would spend a couple hours doing the survey, whether that's straight line, sometimes we fly straight lines back and forth. Just looking out the window other times we're you know, spinning in circles. So if you don't have a stomach for that, that can be a challenge, and identifying and counting all the different things you're seeing. That doesn't end

there. Then we have to come back and actually what we call transcribe the data, you're listening to your data as you're looking at the computer, and then you're actually transcribing what you saw into a data sheet on the computer, and then pass it off to the data crunchers who do a really remarkable job analyzing. You never know, you could have airplane trouble, the weather could roll in unexpectedly. So it's sort of, never the same, and you never know what you're going to see, you could see, you know, especially on the North Slope, we've seen the massive caribou herds running through while you're counting birds, a bear, grizzly bear, seeing polar bears, or a fox raiding a bird nest. So it's it's pretty exciting, you just, you never know what you're going to see. So our data is used for a lot of management decisions and trying to keep our finger on the pulse of what bird populations are doing. Especially in certain areas where we're surveying that are slated for potential oil and gas development, it's also a good way to establish a baseline of what populations were pre development, so we can watch how that could potentially affect birds. You can have 30 to 40 different species and you need to know them all and be able to identify them all from the air flying at 110 miles an hour, and 150 feet above in the air. So it's like a video game almost where you're having to make really snap decisions, and you need to know what you're looking at, and recognize them some from some really awkward angles. So it's a challenge, but it's really rewarding. Sometimes you wish you didn't have to count them, because it's just like, amazing to watch. I do have a favorite bird. I studied loons and grebes for my Masters up in the Mat-Su Valley and red-necked grebes are just cool. They are really fun. They are super animated. They have really cool behaviors. They have these really like adorable, striped little babies, which, you know, as a scientist, we're not supposed to go there. But I mean, you're human, like you're allowed to feel and say cute, I think is a scientist. They just have captured my heart. I think they're fascinating. I spent hours as many folks know, just watching them and I could spend hours and hours doing it again.

All birds have their own unique little thing. I think I love, it's like I'm, I get to watch, like some intimate. I don't know, it's almost like a soap opera. You get to watch nature play out when you're watching birds. If you have the patience and the love of it, you can just sit and watch them for hours. You get to eat, they become kindred spirits, and you get to sort of watch their drama unfold. That I think that's what I get out of it. I'm much more I think emotional about it than were maybe supposed to be as a scientist, but that's how I connect. It feeds into appreciation that feeds into the dedication of wanting to conserve them. You know, I want other people to have that opportunity to love them like I do. And I think that that's what motivates me.

This has been My Life, Wildlife, a production of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Alaska Region, Office of External Affairs, producers, Lisa Hupp, and Kris Pacheco produced in story edited by David Hoffman for citizen racecar audio editing sound design, in original music by Garrett Tiedemann artwork by Michelle Lawson. In Alaska, the employees of the US Fish and Wildlife Service are shared stewards of world renowned natural resources, and our nation's last true wild places. The lands and waters of this place we call home, nourish a vast and unique array of fish, wildlife and people. Our hope is that each generation has the opportunity to live with live from discover and enjoy the wildness of this odd inspiring land and the people who love and depend on it.